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THE BELGIAN UNDERGROUND

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Description

This report concerns the development of the Belgian underground movement. A distinction is made between the passive and active resistance formations. The active resistance is analyzed in terms of its six main components. The tactics and strategy of active resistance in Belgium are considered as well as the relation of the resistance to future military operations and post-war Belgium. The description of the passive opposition movements is made according to the political affiliation of the various groups. A review of the underground press of Belgium, listing the names of the most important papers as well as their political orientation and programs is also given.

19 August 1944

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Summary

The Belgian underground, one of the best organized in occupied Europe, contains active and passive resistance formations. The passive resistance groups, which have been organized mainly by the leaders of the pre-war political parties, aim at the liberation of the country in order to foster their own programs of economic, social, and political reforms. The active resistance forces, on the other hand, do not follow distinct party lines, and have organized sabotage and para-military groups. Their goals are the obstruction of the German administration and the undermining of the German war effort. At present the latter groups have formulated no post-war political program. The strength of the active resistance formations is not known, but it is estimated that the total effective membership does not exceed 10,000.

The main active resistance formations are the Front de l'Indépendance aims at uniting under common direction various smaller clandestine organizations. La Légion Belge, the Communists, La Garde Blanche, Les Mousquetaires, and the Front National de la Liberté. The Front de l'Indépendance aims at uniting under common direction various smaller clandestine organizations. La Légion Belge is supposedly the country's most important para-military group. Its aims are

the coordination of its underground operations with those of the Allies, and the formation of a police organization directed toward maintaining public order in the immediate post-war period. The Communists are reported to be especially active in sabotage, and their supply of arms and ammunition is said to be larger than that of the other groups. La Garde Blanche is a para-military unit, but is also active in sabotage and appears to operate primarily in the Flemish regions. No details are available as to the administrative structure or strength of Les Mousquetaires or the Front National de la Liberté, except that the latter is reported to be organized by the war veterans of the three pre-war political parties. These various resistance groups are especially active in the sabotaging of the communication systems, and the organization of strikes.

The Belgian Government in exile has appointed a leader of all Belgian patriots and has announced the official recognition of the Belgian patriots as a volunteer corps. Certain past activities of the Belgian underground reflect its apparent willingness to cooperate with the Allied High Command.

Among the passive resistance movements, the Catholic Party alone has been able to bring its opposition into the open through the support of the clergy. The Pro-Deo Movement is said to provide a cover for the operations of the

party. The German occupation of the country obstructed the activities of the Labor Party more than those of any other political group. The Socialist underground, however, has worked out detailed post-war objectives which include the unification of the labor unions outside the political parties. The Liberal Party has been particularly active in university and court circles. Little is known of the post-war plans of the Communists, but the latter are said to have increased their number significantly.

Most passive, as well as most active, resistance groups publish clandestine papers. It is said that almost two hundred underground papers are published in occupied Belgium at more or less regular intervals. La Libre Belgique, the leading clandestine paper (representing a moderate Catholic point of view), claims to have reached a circulation of 40,000 copies, while the Socialist underground paper Le Peuple is said to publish 20,000 copies. Many more clandestine papers are published in French than in Flemish. In the period after the liberation of the country, leftist elements in the underground can be expected to demand certain domestic reforms, such as nationalization of public utilities and confiscation of industries owned by quislings. The various underground forces are also likely to influence the trend of government in post-war Belgium.

THE BELGIAN UNDERGROUND

I. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

The Belgian underground, at present one of the best organized in occupied Europe, was slow to develop. It was not till the battle for Britain was over that Belgium gradually recovered from the apathy which had swept over the country as a result of the sudden and unexpected collapse of her army. Politically active people who had fled to France during the first days of the invasion had meanwhile returned to Belgium and began to publish clandestine papers in which they expressed their confidence in Belgium's ultimate liberation. Independent groups performed the first acts of sabotage at the beginning of 1941 but it was apparently not until the end of 1942, however, that liaison between the various groups was established. At that time the collaborationist press began to declare that acts of resistance, far from being spontaneous, were being committed by the "vanguard of a well-organized army of criminals."

Meanwhile, the development of basic differences in strategy and tactics among the various clandestine groups indicated that the Belgian underground contained active and passive resistance formations. While both movements considered the liberation of the country as their principal objective, the passive groups sought their objective within the framework of pre-war political party lines. The active resistance groups, on the other hand,

were not organized according to distinct party lines. Though desirous of enjoying political freedom in the post-war era, the active groups have sought the cooperation of men of various parties in the achievement of specific, immediate goals of obstructing the German administration and undermining the German war effort. For this purpose the active groups have organized para-military and sabotage units. The aims of the passive resistance groups for the period following the liberation of Belgium are directed toward their own program of economic, social, and political reforms.

Although the two types of resistance are separate and distinct, membership in one does not preclude simultaneous membership in the other. Contact between the passive and active resistance movements exists, but the degree to which the two groups have influenced each other cannot be ascertained. From the viewpoint of Allied military operations, however, the active resistance formations are apparently by far the more important.

II. ACTIVE RESISTANCE

A. General

Sabotage of the country's communication system, and of its industry, as well as thefts of ration coupons, and the organization of strikes form the principal operations of the active resistance movements. Certain resistance groups, however, while participating in these activities, have specialized in the planning of military operations to be launched at some opportune moment in the future. The sabotage groups as a result of the nature of their operations are made up primarily of industrial workers, who form separate clandestine groups according to their trades and their geographical location. A trade union underground is known to exist, and it may have connections with the workers' sabotage groups. On the other hand, the Socialist Party, which prior to the war controlled the country's main labor unions, has not organized its own active resistance group.

Although no accurate estimate of the strength of the active resistance formations is possible, it appears that their total effective membership does not exceed 10,000. Many informants maintain that the active resistance groups are more numerous in the Walloon than in the Flemish part of the country, although some informants maintain that the Flemings, under the influence of the Roman Catholic Church, have developed an underground equal in strength to that of the Walloons. The growing

strength of the resistance movement all over Belgium is admitted in the collaborationist press. One of the principal reasons for this growth can be found in the fact that many young men have preferred to join the clandestine groups and live as outlaws rather than to be sent to the Reich as deported workers. Since the change in the German military fortunes the number of young workers choosing the former course has increased significantly.

During the first period of occupation the Belgian resistance movements kept aloof from all contacts with their Government-in-exile, maintaining that it was necessary for a clandestine organization to be directed from within. Later, both the endeavors of the Government in London to remain in constant touch with the home country, and the realization on the part of the underground leaders that outside help was needed brought about the development of a close cooperation between the Government and the underground. Since the Allied invasion, the Belgian Government in London has appointed a "leader of all Belgian Patriots," whose name has not been revealed. The duties and responsibilities of this leader are not known, but it can be assumed that he will serve as liaison between the Government and the various underground groups. A further evidence of Government support of the resistance movement came when the Belgian Minister of Justice

in his speech in July 1944 announced the Government's full recognition of the resistance forces as a volunteer corps that operates with their authority.

The Government never refers to any special group in the underground, nor has any of the active resistance formations ever revealed the specific acts they have performed. It might appear therefore that Belgian resistance groups form part of one single movement; however intelligence received from occupied Belgium reveals the existence of separate groups including six main formations, discussed below.

B. Organizations

1. Front de l'Indépendance. The Independence Front does not aim at setting up an independent organization of its own, but rather at uniting under common direction various small underground groups specializing in sabotage. There is evidence that the Front has succeeded in amalgamating the majority of these resistance formations.

According to recent reports the Belgian Independence Front is gaining ground and is considered one of the strongest and most widespread underground organizations in Belgium. In an announcement made in October 1943 by the National Committee of the Independence Front it was stated that a general meeting of the movement was attended not only by the provincial representatives of the Independence Front but also by delegates of

the Socialist, Catholic, and Communist Parties, as well as of labor and youth organizations. Some important groups, however, such as La Légion Belge, La Garde Blanche, Les Mousquetaires, and the Front National de la Liberté are not known to have joined the Independence Front.

In June 1943 the aims of the movement were outlined in one of the clandestine papers in the following words: "The Independence Front is the clandestine organization which aims at uniting into one single federation all underground factors and all forces which are fighting against the Germans and the quislings. Becoming a member of the Independence Front does not mean that one has to abandon the group to which one belongs.... The Independence Front does not aim at favoring or defending the interest of certain groups of the population nor at furthering any specific political ideal. Its only goal is to help liberate the country from the German invader and to restore the nation's independence. The Independence Front is a movement of close cooperation between the resident governments of the Catholic, Communist, Liberal, and Socialist Parties which have united under the Belgian slogan "in union there is strength."

2. La Légion Belge. The Belgian Legion is supposedly the country's most important para-military group. Its primary objectives are stated to be (a) the organization of a military force which, when invasion comes, can coordinate its operations

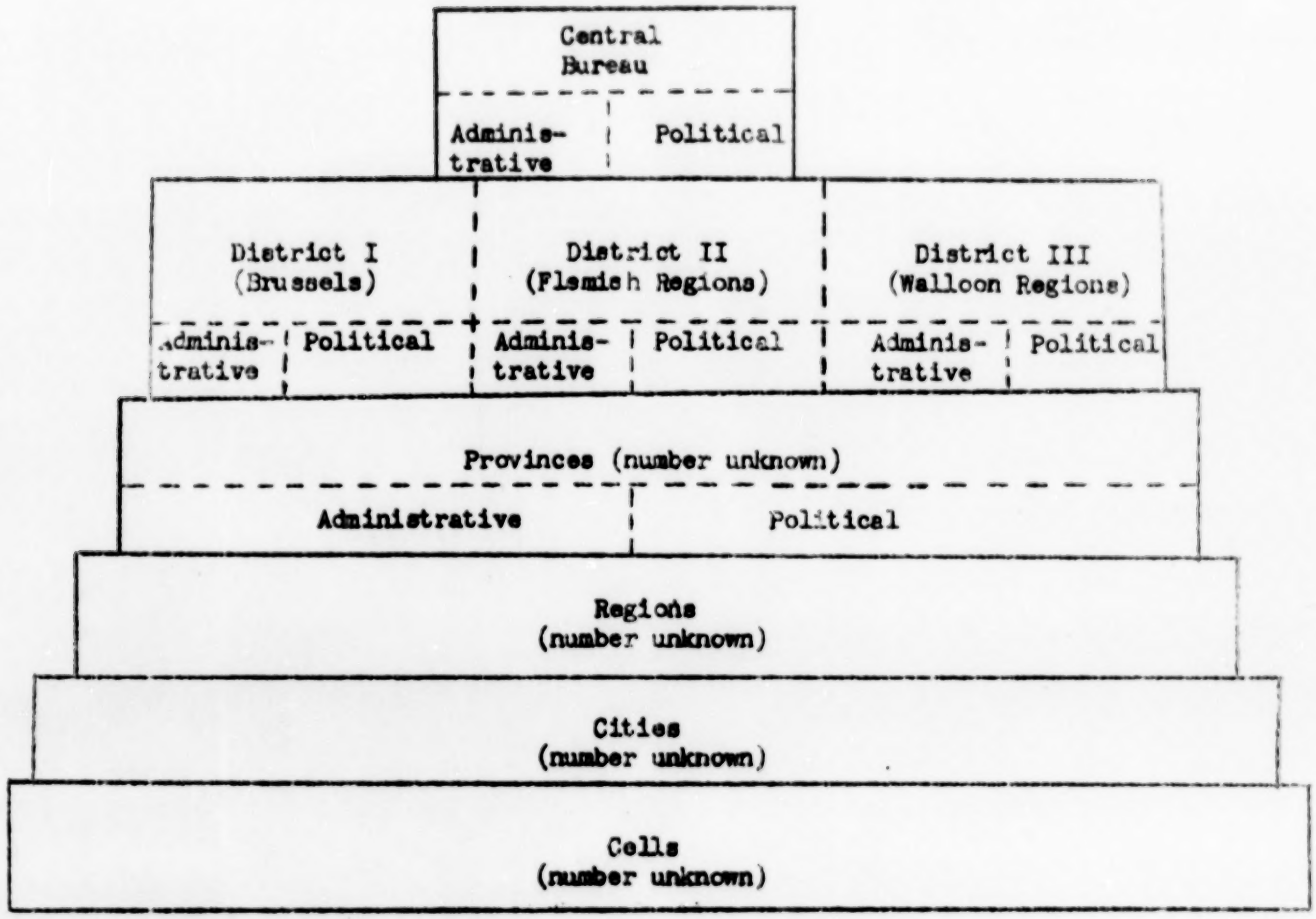
with those of the Allies in accordance with the orders received from the Allied Military Command, and (b) the formation of a police organization directed toward maintaining public order during the period immediately following the invasion. In particular, the Legion declares that it intends to prevent a coup d'état by underground extremists in the period between the collapse of German control and the re-establishment of Belgium's legal Government. The Legion is said to aim at placing the entire administration framework of the country after the liberation into the hands of those pre-war officials who have not collaborated with the Germans. As such the Legion has a political aim, although this aim does not follow party lines.

Opinions on the strength of La Légion Belge differ greatly. Its supporters claim that the Legion will be able to play an important role in future military operations, but others doubt the importance of the Legion and point out that the deportation of 600,000 workers to the Reich has seriously weakened the movement. Its opponents refuse to support the Legion, claiming that it originated in the ranks of the Belgique Loyale, the anti-democratic underground which in the first period of the occupation tried to impose upon Belgium a government under the leadership of King Leopold. Whatever its strength, the Legion is reported to have a large supply of arms and ammunition.

Although information on the organization of most Belgian underground groups is scant, detailed reports are available on the structure of the Légion Belge. It is not known, however, to what extent this organizatior has been put into practice. The Legion is said to be directed by a central bureau (Conseil d'Etat Major Central), made up of its leaders in Brussels and the provinces. The Legion's activities throughout Belgium are reported to be controlled by an elaborate hierarchy of offices. The country has been divided into three districts: Brussels, the Flemish regions, and the Walloon regions. At the head of each district are a district chief for administrative and a second for political activities. The districts are divided into provinces, which are in turn broken up into regions or divisions. Below the latter are said to be organizations for the cities or towns, composed in turn of companies (centuries) which again are split into sections (cells). A section is allegedly composed of about ten men, and a company is formed by about ten sections. Taking into account the administrative personnel, the effective of each company is supposedly 110 men.

At present the movement is reported to devote most of its energies to recruiting new members and to preparing for the day of liberation. Leaders down to the rank of commanding officer of a company are said to have been given definite assignments. The cell chiefs and their men will only be informed

THE ORGANIZATION OF LA LÉGION BELGE



of their mission on the day of action.

In addition to its administrative staff each subdivision is said to contain a political unit. This unit is charged with checking the attitudes of public servants in occupied Belgium while the internal administrative service handles such problems as the supply of arms, money, etc. This separation of functions is said to extend through all principal subdivisions.

The political service has allegedly prepared a long list of people of doubtful reputation and loyalty to be arrested at the time of liberation. Moreover, the personnel to fill the vacancies is also supposed to have been selected.

3. Communists. The Communists are organized under both para-military and sabotage formations. They are the only political party containing separate resistance groups. All other para-military and sabotage units are not organized along party lines. Little is known of the structure and strength of the Communist groups, but according to reliable reports the Communists' supply of arms and ammunition is larger than that of any other clandestine organization.

4. La Garde Blanche (The White Brigade). This movement is active primarily in the Flemish regions, and although formed by para-military units, is very active in sabotage. Available information indicates an elaborate organization. Ten or twelve persons form a "unit," different units form "sections," a number

of sections are organized into "groups," and the groups in turn form "zones." The zones are united into "provinces" which are reported to have military officers as leaders.

The organization has issued a number of proclamations containing instructions to the Belgians as to the attitude to be adopted until and after the day of liberation. These proclamations indicate that at the higher levels the movement is divided into various service departments, one of which is known as the Section for the Punishment of Traitors (Section Punitive Belge).

5. Les Mousquetaires (The Musketeers). No details on the strength or the administrative structure of this underground movement have been received. They are said to be active in the Walloon districts where they are organizing military groups in preparation for the time of liberation.

6. Front National de la Liberté (National Liberty Front). War veterans of the three big political parties, Catholic, Socialist, and Liberal, are reported to have formed a National Liberty Fund dedicated to national liberation. Details of their activities are not available but it is reported that sabotage is their main activity. In London a small group of Belgians has established an organization under the same name to help the underground in Belgium.

7. Maquis. As a result of the German labor deportation decrees ranks of the Belgium resistance movements have greatly increased since October 1942. Men who would not have joined the underground under normal conditions have preferred to live as outlaws in the mountains rather than be shipped as laborers to the Reich. The Ardennes are the main hiding place of these resistance groups who are known under the French name of Maquis. The various resistance movements have helped to organize the Maquis into operational units and supplied them with food, clothing, and arms.

C. Tactics and Strategy

The sabotaging of communication systems stands out as the most important activity of the various active resistance movements in Belgium. Railroad sabotage has disrupted transportation in Belgium to such a degree, that the German authorities have resorted to almost daily appeals to the railway personnel for cooperation. Although it is not known which resistance groups are most active in this specific field, it appears certain that apart from the sabotage performed by the organized formations, numerous acts are carried out spontaneously by independent patriots. Realizing that there is greater strength in organized action, the Belgian Government in London has appealed to the railway men to follow only the instructions given by the underground leaders.

Besides the sabotage of the country's communication system, Belgian patriots have been particularly successful in the organization of strikes. These accomplishments have been primarily due to the fact that the Belgian patriots do not incite workers to indiscriminate strikes, but attempt to organize them for the attainment of specific demands. Requests for higher wages, better working conditions, more food, and other similar demands, have served the patriots as motives for calling strikes, most of which have ended by German compliance with the workers' requests.

Certain past activities of the Belgian underground forces reflect their apparent willingness to cooperate with the Allied High Command.

III. PASSIVE OPPOSITION MOVEMENTS

A. General Characteristics

The passive opposition groups in occupied Belgium, in contrast to most active resistance units, have been formed by the pre-war constitutional parties. The passive opposition groups aim at building up the morale of the population against the Germans, lending support to the resistance movements, and organizing the population in support of their political program for post-war reconstruction. Unification of action among these different political groups is not likely. The political parties, aware of the public support for the active resistance groups, organized their movements because they were afraid of losing contact with the public. Unable to start a public campaign to win political supporters, or to discuss openly plans for the administration of the country in the post-war era, the political parties held underground meetings to prepare their reorganization. Contact with the active resistance groups was established, but the degree to which the two movements have influenced each other is not known. Only the Communists have achieved a close unity between the active and passive resistance groups of their party.

B. Catholic Party

While the other political parties were being forced to operate exclusively through underground channels, the Catholic Party was able to bring its opposition into the

open through the activities of the clergy. On numerous occasions the Primate of Belgium, Cardinal Archbishop Van Roey, as well as other church dignitaries openly opposed the German administration. Few of them have become German collaborators. Their stand on the German labor deportation order, on the persecution of the Jews, and their general attitude towards the Belgian quislings are an indication of the clergy's spirit of opposition. This spirit finds its most forceful expression in the Pro-Deo Movement, which is said to provide a cover for the operations of the party. Little is known of the exact organization of the movement, but the severity with which the Germans have tried to extirpate it is an indication of its potentiality.

The Pro-Deo underground is said to maintain contacts with representatives in London. Father Jean Loslever, a popular Dominican preacher before the war and founder of the Union Catholique du Théâtre and Father George Donthinne, formerly head of an organization of students at the University of Liége are reported to be active in directing its program from abroad. Other representatives of the Catholic Party in London have formed an international organization known as the Glaive de l'Esprit (Sword of the Spirit) to coordinate the underground within the party from abroad.

Little is known about the post-war plans made by the underground Catholic Party during the occupation. However, on the monarchical question the Church and the

Catholic underground party have, unlike most other clandestine groups, taken a definite pro-Royalist stand. Some agreement has also been reached between Catholic and Socialist leaders on a common post-war policy and it is even reported, though not confirmed by Catholic sources, that some understanding has been reached on the turbulent Belgian educational problem. According to this latter agreement, the Church would be granted the right to establish parochial schools with subsidies paid by the central government, provided that the schools accept state supervision.

C. Socialist Party

Of all Belgian parties, the Socialist Party (sometimes referred to as the Labor Party) was most seriously affected by German occupation. The Germans dissolved the party in the first month of the occupation. Most of the party's representatives left the country in May 1940, taking with them the party funds. This fact was immediately exploited by German propaganda, though a few leaders returned after the fall of France. The Socialist Party experienced another loss of prestige when Henri de Man, its pre-war president, joined the ranks of the quislings.

Younger elements of the party started clandestine anti-German reorganization and undertook underground activity in the Liége area which prior to the war was a Socialist stronghold.

Contacts between the various Socialist Party centers were established and some of the older party representatives joined the ranks of the underground.

In 1942 a two-day convention was held in Namur; representatives from all over the country participated and the reorganization of the party was decided upon. Reconstituted under the name of Belgian Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste Belge) the Socialists rejected the authoritarian ideas which prior to the war were advocated by Socialists led by Henri de Man.

A "Program for Immediate Action" was published in February 1944 in Le Peuple, the leading clandestine paper of the Belgian Socialist Party. This article advocated "real democracy in the economic as in the political field" and sharply attacked the capitalist system which it held responsible for the war.

The new Socialist platform was summarized in five main points. The first dealt with the structure of the government, which it declared should be "essentially democratic" and in which "each minister would be effectively responsible for the activities of his department." The second point, after referring to the punishment of traitors, asked for a revision of the Constitution and a clearer definition of the role of the executive with a view toward curtailing his power. Questions of food supply were the subject of the third point, which contained recommendations as to the suppression of

Nazi-imposed food control agencies and the establishment of a new food department and a food council composed of representatives of distributors and consumers. Fourth, the Socialist program advocated an increase in wages, the introduction of workers' and employers' representative committees, the creation of a national labor council and a youth commissariat, and the readjustment of old-age pension laws. The fifth point in the program dealt with economic problems, such as the confiscation of the property of traitors as well as of the profits made by persons who have worked for the Germans. Control of banks and the nationalization of electricity and of all public transportation services were also sought.

In the field of labor unions concrete objectives seem to have been worked out. A general tendency to seek the unification of labor unions outside the political parties has been manifested in discussions in underground circles. Representatives of the various clandestine movements in London say that a working agreement between the Socialist and Christian Democratic labor unions is likely to be accepted. Moreover, close contact seems to have been established between the Socialists in Belgium and those in Great Britain. Members of the Belgian Socialist party in England have formed an association called the Groupement Emile Vandervelde, which has developed a plan for the rehabilitation of Belgium after the war. Since a number of

influential union leaders under Joseph Bondas, general secretary of the Confédération Générale du Travail de Belgique - CGTB (General Confederation of Labor in Belgium), have managed to reach London, it is likely that this plan has the approval of the Socialists in Belgium.

D. Liberal Party

The Liberal Party, weakened by a loss of membership in the last years before the war, has not organized an underground with nation-wide influence. During the occupation, however, it has increased its prestige because of the loyalty of its members to the resistance. In university and court circles, followers of the Liberal Party have organized local opposition movements, but they have not succeeded in gaining any considerable influence among the workers or the farmers. In England the Liberals have organized a special committee which maintains contact with their colleagues in occupied Belgium. No detailed post-war plans prepared by the Liberal Party's underground have thus far been received.

E. Communist Party

The Communist Party is said to have increased in membership more than any other political group in occupied Belgium largely because of its well organized and active underground. Many Belgians primarily interested in active resistance are said to have joined its ranks, not because they accept the Communist program, but because it conducts well organized and effective resistance activities.

IV. UNDERGROUND PRESS

The growth of a cla destine press in Belgium has surpassed that of most other occupied countries. It is believed that almost two hundred underground papers are printed in occupied Belgium at more or less regular intervals. Compared with a total of seventy daily and three hundred and fifty weekly newspape circulating in Belgium before the war, the number of clandestine papers represents an impressive figure. All political parties and a great number of active resistance groups have their own underground publications. In some cases, as a matter of fact, the publication of a paper is the only activity of an opposition group. A great number of underground papers are of only local importance and many appeal only to a specific class of society. Separate clandestine papers have been published for students, doctors, lawyers, and policemen. Former youth organizations and the old trade unions have their own publications and a separate paper is printed for women. Many more underground papers are published in French than in Flemish.

The clandestine newspapers for the most part limit themselves to the expression of general opinions. The only expressions common to the papers of all underground movements are a hatred for the Germans, a desire for the severe punishment of all traitors, a hope for the early liberation of the country, and confidence in Allied military strength. The principal

function of the Belgian underground press is to maintain a contact between resistance groups and the people in general, and to serve as a builder of morale.

The most important underground papers classified according to their political affiliations are:

a. Catholic: La Libre Belgique (Free Belgium), La Legion Noire (The Black Legion), La Cité Nouvelle (The New City), and La Lanterne (The Lantern).

b. Socialist: Le Peuple (The People), Le Monde du Travail (Working World), Combattre (Fight), Vaincre (Win), L'Espoir (Hope), Vrijheid (Liberty), and Vrije Jeugd (Free Youth).

c. Liberal: Le Belge (The Belgian), and La Brabançonne.

d. Communist: Le Drapeau Rouge (The Red Flag), De Rode Vaan (The Red Flag), Liberté (Liberty), Clarté (Light), Les Temps Nouveaux (Modern Times), Voici l'URSS (This is the USSR), Les Amis de l'URSS (Friends of the USSR), and Radio Moscow.

e. Independence Front: Libération, La Meuse, Le Pays Wallon (The Walloon Region), L'Indépendance, Belgie Vrij (Belgium Free), and Vrijheidsklok (The Bell of Liberty).

f. Special Group: Justice Libre (Free Justice), Médicine Libre, La Voix des Femmes (The Voice of the Women), Université Libre, and La Voix des Belges (The Voice of the Belgians).

The best known and most important of these are La Libre Belgique, Le Peuple, L'Espoir, Le Drapeau Rouge, Le Monde du Travail, and La Voix des Belges.

The printing of La Libre Belgique is excellent for an underground paper. At present it has separate editions in Brussels, Liége, and Antwerp, and claims to have reached a

circulation of 40,000 copies. It represents the moderate Catholic point of view. It was the first Belgian underground paper to be published, its first issue appearing on 15 August 1940. Le Peuple is the official paper of the Socialist underground and has a circulation of 20,000 copies. It strongly supports Socialist principles, and answers the criticism of the Communists. Le Drapeau Rouge, the official paper of the Communist underground, pleads for active resistance in contrast to the appeals for the postponement of all sabotage as advocated by the right wing clandestine press. Le Drapeau Rouge urges severe punishment for all traitors and devotes much attention to Russian military successes. The same point of view appears in numerous other Communist papers, as well as in the publications of the Front de l'Indépendance.

V. THE UNDERGROUND CONCEPTION OF PROBLEMS OF THE LIBERATION PERIOD

German attempts to counteract the Belgian resistance movement have been numerous. The Nazis, hoping to disrupt the underground organization before the liberation of the country, have tried to incite the patriots to premature activity. Spurious underground papers have been published and attempts have been made to introduce traitors into resistance formations as agents provocateurs.

In the event of Allied military operations in Belgium, the underground apparently can be expected to follow the instructions of the Supreme Allied High Command. This assumption is supported

by the Government's recognition of the resistance forces as a volunteer corps and the official appointment of a Leader of all Belgian Patriots.

The various clandestine groups will undoubtedly endeavor to influence Belgium's post-war political life. Removal of all collaborationists from official posts and severe punishment of the traitors are points included in the programs of all underground parties. As far as is known no underground formation contests the legality of the Belgian Government in London. The Ministers' promise to resign on their return to liberated Belgium has eliminated conflict on that question. Discussions on the time and method for holding the new elections, however, will undoubtedly provoke disagreement. Simultaneously the monarchical issue is likely to come to a head. The Leftist clandestine groups, both active and passive, realizing that the center of opposition to Leopold is to be found among the workers, mainly because Leopold did nothing to prevent their deportation, will insist on the postponement of the decision till the return of all the deported workers, while groups close to the Crown will try to force the issue.

It is unlikely that underground requests for changes in Belgium's social legislation will cause serious difficulties. However, demands of certain underground groups for nationalization of public utilities, and the confiscation of industries owned by quislings may create internal tension in the immediate post-war period.